

Disability Awareness Month

WORKING WITH LOCAL CLERGY

A place of worship should be a place where all people, regardless of race, disability or gender, can worship. A religious community is an excellent place to increase awareness of the abilities of people with disabilities. As new members are recruited, it is important to include people with disabilities and seek their involvement and participation.

There are several ways to work with the local places of worship in your area: 1) focus on increasing disability awareness in your own congregation; 2) if you do not belong to one, focus on increasing awareness in one or more congregations in the community; or 3) invite other places of worship in the community to join with yours to increase awareness.

Getting Started

For a congregation to make lasting changes, a planning structure is needed. The first step is to create a Disability Task Force. One way to give the task force stature is to ask the place of worship's clergy member to sign a letter inviting members to serve. Then, get backing from the congregational governing board.

If you are working with one place of worship, the task force should include you and people who have disabilities; parents and relatives of people with disabilities; a Sunday school teacher; a student from the high school youth group; a member who works with people with disabilities; a member of the congregation's mission committee; an elder or a deacon; and the church's clergy member. It also might be a good idea to recruit people skilled in policy-making, planning and leading worship, coordinating educational programs, fund raising, community outreach and written communications.

If several congregations are taking part, each should have its own Disability Task Force. Another committee should be organized to bring together members of each task force. Then Awareness Month activities can be planned within each place of worship and as a community of congregations.

The following information offers ideas you can implement in your place of worship. Your Disability Task Force might come up with other ideas not mentioned here. We also suggest that you check with the national office of your religious denomination for any information it might have on the subject of disabilities.

Defining Objectives

The book *Creating the caring congregation* by Harold H. Wilke (see resources section) lists some objectives on which it is important for the task force to focus initially:

1. Recognize the dual task: architectural and attitudinal accessibility.
2. Work with persons with disabilities; listen to their feelings and concerns.
3. Work with the member of the clergy on a consciousness-raising experience to take place during a worship service.
4. Work through the church school staff to create opportunities for simulations of disabilities for children and adults.
5. Create simulation experiences for people within the place of worship to occur at a fair or other function when the exercise is visible to many people.
6. Work with the worship committee to discover ways in which people with various kinds of physical or sensory disabilities are excluded by the current forms of worship.
7. Develop a study theme on attitudinal barriers for education groups for children and adults.

Introducing Disability Awareness Month

Posters placed in high traffic areas in your place of worship are an easy way to increase awareness of people with disabilities and their rights as American citizens. The Governor's Planning Council offers posters, bookmarks, stickers and numerous other

collateral materials each year for Disability Awareness Month. To order, call Kim Dennison at (317) 631-6400 (voice).

Another effective way to increase awareness is through the congregation's newsletter. In many newsletters, the clergy member writes a column. Ask if he or she will write about people with disabilities for the March newsletter. You can also place a small article about what the place of worship will be doing during the month of March and reprint the Disability Awareness Month camera-ready artwork (enclosed in this packet).

Education – Sunday School

Check with your local religious bookstores for any educational materials they have available on the subject of disabilities. You might want to have children discuss experiences they have had with people with disabilities – a family member, a person in the neighborhood or at school or someone seen at a shopping mall. It is important to explain that people with disabilities are people first. If a member of your congregation has a disability, have him or her speak to the Sunday school classes. You might have the children put on a short presentation for the congregation about how to interact with people with disabilities. The brochure *Interacting with People with Disabilities* provides information about correct and incorrect behavior when interacting with someone with a disability.

In his book, *Unexpected guests at God's banquet: Welcoming people with disabilities into the church* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), Brett Webb-Mitchell offers 10 points to consider to open Sunday school programs to all children:

1. We are all created in the image of God. This means that we are created in the image of God, blessed with both the capability of creativity, within boundaries, and to be in relationship with one another.
2. Knowing that we are created in the image of God, seek to learn *everyone's* creative abilities and limitations. Use these individual abilities to complement each other within the congregation.
3. Explore what the child can do by listening, watching, touching, interacting, playing games and participating in rituals with the child in the broader context of the congregation.

4. Invite all the members of the congregation who interact with the child and family to join in this exploration. As a member of a congregation, this child is now part of an *extensive family relationship* that includes all others in the congregation's life.
5. Places of worship need to maintain the position that children with disabilities should be with other children of their age and grade, similar to public school classrooms.
6. Regardless of ability, many children will develop and sustain their character by engaging in relationships with other children their age.
7. There is no doubt that there will be an increase in the production of noise, more of a mess, and stunning silence when including children with disabilities in Sunday school and worship. This is as it should be. Again, children with disabilities are created in the image of God, the *author* of noise, mess and silence.
8. *Best buddies*, computers and extra helpers are all great additions to a Sunday school classroom, youth activities and even worship. Communication boards, computers and other augmentative methods of communications should be allowed in Sunday school and worship so that *all* may participate.
9. Try different ways of telling the story of God's love for this world. Most Sunday school curriculum is biased toward presenting the material using only reading and writing assignments. Instead, consider music, drama, art, mime, oral interpretation and dance for lessons.

Education – High School

Discussions of disability issues can also take place at a high school youth group meeting. Again, the *Interacting with People with Disabilities* brochure is a good resource. High school youth groups might also want to:

1. Recruit new youth group members with disabilities;
2. Conduct a fund-raising campaign for accessibility improvements in the place of worship;
3. Plan an activity with a group of high school-aged people with disabilities – such as going to the movies or baking cookies; or
4. Watch and discuss a film, movie or videotape about people with disabilities – such as “My Left Foot,” “Rainman” or “Children of a Lesser God.”

Education – Adult

Invite a speaker who has a disability or who works with people with disabilities to come to talk with the congregation. You might not have to search outside of the congregation to find a speaker or a panel of speakers. Check to see if there are people in your congregation who have friends or family members with disabilities. There might even be someone in the congregation who has, or has had, a disability.

If you need to search for a speaker, many of the organizations that work with people with disabilities, parent organizations or advocacy groups are good resources for knowledgeable speakers. Contact a local organization and let them know your congregation is interested in a speaker. Tell the group what your congregation is interested in learning, and the group should be able to match an appropriate speaker from its organization. Ask if there will be any fee involved for the speaker. If these groups aren't available in your local community, try state agencies or organizations to find the nearest chapter that can provide a speaker. There might be people with disabilities in your community who would agree to speak at your place of worship. People with disabilities usually have the greatest impact when speaking about disabilities. If the speaker has a disability, make sure the meeting place is accessible to him/her.

Adult awareness about people with disabilities is very important. The place of worship is a source of support and fellowship as well as worship. Members of the congregation, therefore, need to be sensitive to people with disabilities. The right attitude toward people with disabilities and acceptance of them will help a congregation welcome a new member who has a disability.

Worship Service

Devote one Sunday in March as Disability Sunday. Luke 14:12-23 deals with the inclusion of all people in coming to worship God and relates well to Disability Awareness Month. The Sunday school classes could become involved by sharing their presentations on how to interact with people with disabilities. You might want to consider singing songs about human diversity and the inclusion of everyone and arranging for someone to interpret the worship service in sign language.

Accessibility

Is your place of worship accessible to people with disabilities? It is crucial that all people be able to worship and participate comfortably. In fact, you might want to conduct an accessibility audit. Look at the worship service bulletins. Can copies be printed in larger type for people with visual impairments? Can audio speakers be available to help people with hearing impairments? Can the sermon be signed for deaf members? Physical access is important, too. Please refer to the enclosed 14-page accessibility checklist to rate the accessibility of your place of worship.

In addition, The United Methodist Church provides a 20-page booklet entitled “Accessibility audit for churches.” See the resource section in this packet for more information.

Accessible Congregations Campaign

The Accessible Congregations Campaign (ACC) seeks commitment of 2,000 congregations to include people with disabilities as involved participants in congregation activities. To meet the goal, 40 congregations from each state must join the campaign, which is sponsored by the Religion and Disability Program of the National Organization on Disability (NOD).

The theme “Access: It Begins in the Heart,” encompasses the goal to open hearts, minds and doors to people with disabilities. By acknowledging that the place of worship has barriers that inhibit full participation of people with disabilities, the congregation can begin making changes.

Joining the ACC costs nothing. A congregation’s only obligation is to use the gifts and talents of people with disabilities in all areas of service, including worship, study and leadership. As a member of the ACC, congregations receive a free brochure, information packet and commitment certificate.

The names of each Accessible Congregation are made available to Initiative 2000, a nationwide celebration of the achievements and contributions of people with disabilities. Initiative 2000 was the sponsor of a cross-country torch relay celebrating the

10th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 2000. Accessible Congregations along the route were invited to participate in the relay.

Congregations throughout Indiana are encouraged to receive accessible certification. To become a member, contact Lorraine Thal, NOD, 910 16th St. N.W., Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20006; or call (202) 293-5960 (voice).

Responding to Concerns of the Religious Community

It is the intention of the ADA to ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in all areas of society and are free from discrimination. This goal is consistent with the teachings of the world's major religions. Although religious organizations and the entities they control are exempt from some areas of the law, they are governed by the moral mandates of love and justice, which state that places of worship should welcome everyone. The following questions, taken from the National Organization on Disability's *Loving Justice: The ADA and the Religious Community*, address some specific requirements of the law as they relate to the religious community.

Q: Are all employees of religious organizations covered by the employment provisions of the ADA?

A: Generally, with the exception of those involved in the religious ministry, such as ministers, priests or rabbis, all employees of a religious organization with 15 or more employees are covered by Title I of the ADA.

Q: Are individual congregations required by the ADA to make their buildings accessible?

A: No. Individual congregations are considered religious organizations and are not subject to the accessibility requirements of Title III.

Q: Does the ADA public accommodations section apply to a religious college which receives no direct state or federal funding, but has one or more students with federally sponsored guaranteed loans or grants?

A: If the religious college is itself a religious organization or an entity controlled by a religious organization, Title III of the ADA would not apply. However, student use of federal guaranteed loans or grants at the college will obligate the college to comply with the accessibility and nondiscrimination requirements of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Q: Under Title IV of the ADA, is a religious entity required to purchase a TT?

A: No. Title IV does not require a religious entity to purchase a TT. However, a religious entity subject to the employment provisions of Title I of the ADA might have to provide a TT for use by an employee with a hearing impairment in order to fulfill its responsibility to make reasonable accommodations to the known disabilities of its employees.

Theological Principles

Beginning in 1958 and as recently as 1995, the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC) has affirmed its belief in the dignity and worth of all people. The NCCC has reaffirmed and broadened its commitment to people with disabilities based upon the following four theological statements:

1. All people are created in the image of God.
"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image ...'" (Genesis 1:26)
2. All people are called by God.
"For we are what (God) has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2:10)
3. All people have special gifts.
"Now there are varieties of gifts but the same spirit ..." (1 Corinthians 12:4)
4. All people are invited to participate in God's ministry
"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."
(1 Corinthians 12:7)

Community Involvement

Plan to become involved with people with disabilities in your community and begin establishing growing relationships with them. One suggestion is to set up a Help-Line, offering assistance to people with disabilities in your congregation's neighborhood. For example, people with disabilities sometimes need transportation to the doctor's office or store, help moving into an apartment or help making a telephone call.

Set up a fund-raising event to assist parents of a child with a disability who needs special medical care. Hospital and medical costs often exceed what a family can afford.

If your place of worship is accessible to people with disabilities, offer the space for weekly advocacy group meetings.

RESOURCES

Internet/Booklet

N.O.D. Accessible Congregations Campaign. This program promotes the inclusion of people with disabilities in all service areas of congregations, as well as the accessibility of meeting places. For more information, visit the N.O.D. Web site at: www.nod.org. The Accessible Congregations Campaign can be printed or downloaded from the site. For a written copy of the campaign or for more information, contact Lorraine Thal, coordinator of Accessibility Congregations Campaign, at (202) 293-5960 (voice), (202) 293-5968 (TT), (202) 293-7999 (fax) or religion@nod.org (e-mail). Written requests can be mailed to: Accessibility Congregations Campaign, Religion and Disability Program, National Organization on Disability, 910 Sixteenth Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

Books

A statement of faith and call to action: With study guide on "The church and persons with handicapping conditions." 1980. Provides a historical perspective and a call for personal and collective action to bring about inclusiveness. One to nine copies are 65 cents each; 10 or more copies are 55 cents each. Add \$1.50 for postage. Stock # 3657. To order, see below.*

Accessibility audit for churches: Opening doors for persons with handicapping conditions. 1983. Helps people to discover accessibility barriers in churches. Single copies are \$3.50 plus \$1.50 postage. Stock # 3810. To order, see below.*

Creating the caring congregation. Wilke, H. Founder and director of the Healing Community, Wilke explores the specific needs of people with disabilities and how the church can – and must – show love and concern. To order a copy, please write to Harold Wilke, 521 Harrison, Claremont, CA 91711. The cost is \$7.

From barriers to bridges. 1995. Published by the National Organization on Disability as a companion to *That all may worship* and *Loving justice*, the nondenominational guide suggests how to increase acceptance and participation of people with disabilities in their local religious communities. To order, write to N.O.D., 910 Sixteenth St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

Jewish education materials. Offered by YACHAD: the National Jewish Council for the Disabled, a division of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, which works to integrate high functioning developmentally disabled adolescents into existing NCSY chapters. Materials include guidelines, a bi-monthly magazine for participants and sensitivity programs for the non-disabled NCSY'ers. To order a copy, write to YACHAD, 333 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001, or call (212) 563-4000 ext. 268 (voice).

Jewish special individuals: Their God and their world. Published by United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Commission on Jewish Education. To order, write to United

Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Commission on Jewish Education, 155 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010-6802, or call (212) 533-7800 (voice).

Loving justice: The ADA and the religious community. 1994. Published by the National Organization on Disability as a companion to *That all may worship*, the 36-page resource guide describes how portions of the ADA, including Title I employment provisions, apply to religious institutions. Single copies are \$10 each, with discounts for bulk orders. To order, write to N.O.D., 910 Sixteenth St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

My child is different. Rabbi Robert Layman. Published by United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Commission on Jewish Education, this offers advice to Jewish parents of special children on how to maximize their Jewish experiences and family life. To order, write to United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Commission on Jewish Education, 155 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010-6802, or call (212) 533-7800 (voice).

My confirmation book I & II. Meyer, Catherine. Published by Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services, this is a 300-page collection of lessons, drawings and activities developed by a religious education teacher who has worked with people with mental retardation for more than 30 years. Single copies are \$15 each. To order, call 1-800-369-4636 ext. 418 (voice), or send a check or money order to Bethesda, c/o Confirmation Book, 700 Hoffman Drive, Watertown, WI 53094.

Strength for His people: A ministry for families of the mentally ill. Written by the brother of a man with schizophrenia, this book is an application of the Bible to specific questions and needs among Christian families of the mentally ill. Free copies are provided as a ministry of the Westcliff Baptist Church, P.O. Box 1521, Amarillo, TX 79105. Or call (806) 359-6362 (voice).

That all may worship. Davie, A. R. and Thornburgh, G. 1994, third printing. Published by the National Organization on Disability, this interfaith handbook discusses how to provide accessible worship and remove attitudinal barriers. Recommended for people with disabilities, congregations, denominational groups and seminaries. Single copies are \$10 each, with discounts for bulk orders. To order, write to N.O.D., 910 Sixteenth St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy program to improve religious education for children and adults with mental retardation. Written for the student with mild to moderate mental retardation, this manual has 260 lesson plans and prayer services, a parent handbook, resources and much more that is appropriate for use in inclusive classrooms, specialized classrooms or at home. Single copies are \$35 plus \$5 for shipping and handling. Order from the Department for Persons with Disabilities, 48 South 14th Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15203.

Your own congregation; Your own commitment. A free packet of materials that can be ordered by writing to Harold Wilke, 521 Harrison Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711.

*** To order *A statement of faith and call to action*, or *Accessibility audit for churches* (from page 8 of this packet): Send your name, address, stock number, quantity, title and price of each item to: Service Center, General Board of Global Ministries, 7802 Reading Road, Caller # 1800, Cincinnati, OH 45222-1800.**